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Multicultural education in a Korean early childhood classroom : based on the educational community perspective

Juyoun Kyun^a, Kaisook Chung^{b*}, Sumin Ryu^c, Anna Han^d^a*Educational Development Institution, Pusan National University, South Korea*^b*Department of Early Childhood Education, Pusan National University, South Korea*^c*BK21 Plus Eco-Edu System Research Team, Department of Early Childhood Education, Pusan National University, South Korea*^d*BK21 Plus Eco-Edu System Research Team, Department of Early Childhood Education, Pusan National University, South Korea*

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the multicultural education in a Korean early childhood classroom based on the educational community perspective. The study participants included a teacher in charge of the Sunshine classroom for age 5 and 21 preschoolers at a child-care center located in the city of Pusan, South Korea. Data were gathered by observing their classroom and by interviewing the preschoolers and the teacher, and the collected data were analyzed. The results were as follows; The situation of the class as a place of multicultural education, that was largely categorized into two: the reality of multicultural education and the limited contextual classroom factors both internally and externally. The multicultural education was subcategorized into three: the prior understanding of the teacher, the implementation of multicultural education, and the difficulties of the teacher. As for the limited internal and external factors of the classroom context, the preschoolers looked at their peers from multicultural families in a negative way, and there was lack of interaction between internal and external classroom components. Based on these results, the implications were also discussed.

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* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: juyoun1209@hanmail.net

1. INTRODUCTION

Lots of research efforts have been directed into multicultural education in the field of early childhood education, probably because of a growing concern for multicultural education in Korean society. Specifically, there are heated discussions on the reality of multicultural education in the classroom and on the right directions for that. According to the statistics annual report of the Ministry of Security and Public Administration (2012), one of the government agencies of Korea, the number of foreign residents stood at 1,409,577 as of 2012, which accounted for 2.8 percent of the entire Korean population. The number of marriage immigrants stood at 140 thousand people or more, and there is a steady increase in the number every year. The ministry mentioned that Korean society already turned into a multicultural society. Obviously, Korea is a multicultural society, and the number of preschoolers from multicultural families who attend early childhood education institutions is gradually on the rise. Under the circumstances, it seems necessary to find out how multicultural education is conducted in the early childhood classroom.

In general, the early childhood classroom is one of the community and the first place for the community life of human beings. That is a place where education is conducted, a space of living where teachers and preschoolers build their network through mutual social interaction (Im, Yang & Song, 2012), and a place where they undergo changes under the influence of classroom contexts. The community is necessary in order to keep the society go on. When the people understand each other in community, they can compose an open relationship and as a subject (Suh, 2005). When young children first come to school, they tend to bring with a potential to explore their range of responses (Darlene, Witte-Townsend, Anne, 2006). That is, there may be different shifts in the classroom depending on the concept, objects and content of multicultural education, teachers, preschoolers, their personal, relational and contextual characteristics, and the interaction of all these variables. Therefore the reality of multicultural education in the Korean early childhood classroom should accurately be grasped to determine the state of current early childhood multicultural education and to discuss the right directions for that.

The purpose of this study was to examine the reality of multicultural education in the early childhood classroom that based on the educational community perspective. The research question was posed: What is the state of multicultural education in the Sunshine classroom from an educational community perspective?

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Participants

The study participants included a teacher in charge of the Sunshine classroom for age 5 and 21 preschoolers at a child-care center located in the city of Pusan, South Korea.

2.2. Data Collection

The data were selected with the permission of the child-care center and with the consent of the parents of the preschoolers on February 17, 2012, and were gathered from then onto April 6 by observing their classroom and by interviewing the teacher and the preschoolers to determine the state of the classroom as a place for multicultural education. The classroom was observed two or three times a week, and what the preschoolers did while they stayed at the preschool from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. was all observed. The teacher was interviewed three times, and the preschoolers were interviewed once or twice. All the interviews were semi-structured and were recorded with the permission of the teacher and the parents of the preschoolers.

2.3. Data Analysis

As for data analysis, Kim (2006)'s inductive data analysis method for qualitative research was utilized to address the research question. In this study, the data were collected by observation, interviews and discussions, reflective

journals, test results and results of classroom activities. And they were analyzed using triangulation with regard to ensuring validity and reliability for qualitative.

To avoid bias in interpretation of data, the data were reviewed from research process to the end of the last review process by the teacher of Sunshine class through member checking. Peer debriefing were used to review research methods, interpretation, and analysis by two experts in early childhood education.

3. RESULTS

The situation of the classroom as a multicultural early childhood classroom, that was largely categorized into two: the reality of multicultural education and the limited contextual classroom factors both internally and externally. The reality of multicultural education was subcategorized into three: the prior understanding of the teacher, the implementation of multicultural education, and the difficulties of the teacher.

The aspects of multicultural education that was conducted in class "Sunshine classroom" were as follows: First, the teacher who was in charge of this class thought that there was much more to be desired in Nayoung and Yeona than their peers, and that they had many problems. And she thought she needed to resolve their problems. Thus, she looked at the preschoolers from multicultural families from a standpoint of cultural deficit model. It implies that the teacher provided individualized acculturation education. Second, she wanted the two children from multicultural families to settle down in Korean culture as soon as possible, and she thought they were in need of assimilation to grow into well-adjusted, eligible Koreans. Third, the teacher accepted the cultural specificity of the preschoolers from multicultural families sometimes, and sometimes she didn't. It signifies that early childhood teachers should provide multicultural education in a coherent manner according to their belief and philosophy. Fourth, the teacher firmly believed that multicultural education was to let preschoolers understand food, language, play or traditional costume of other countries, and she failed to link with multicultural education what happened in the classroom due to that idea. Fifth, she taught misconceptions to preschoolers without knowing well about other cultures and countries. In fact, it's not actually possible for teachers to be knowledgeable about weather, topography or geographical features of different countries that they have never been to, and it's not advisable to blame them for lack of knowledge, either. The problem is, however, that they often convey wrong knowledge or information to preschoolers as if it was true. Sixth, the teacher just focused on differences between cultures and their diversity when she provided multicultural education.

There were several aspects in multicultural education provided in the classroom: individualized adjustment education based on a cultural deficit model, generalized assimilative approach, the teacher's confusion of cultural specificity, inadequate approach toward daily routine life, teaching misconceptions about foreign countries and culture, and limited content.

Next, concerning the difficulties of the teacher, she was at a loss about how to practice multicultural education, and she felt the lack of a supportive system. The difficulties that the teacher faced were about the content of education, namely what to teach, and about educational methods. She wasn't sure about how to conduct multicultural education, and she was sorry about the absence of support from the principal, colleagues and parents whom she worked together. In addition, she was pressed for time due to heavy workload, and she didn't have any breadth of mind at the same time.

As for internal and external contextual restrictions in the classroom, the way the peers looked at the preschoolers from multicultural families was negative. They teased or neglected them because of their different skin color, appearance or harsh household economy. For instance, they said to Nayoung whose skin color was a little dark, "Why is your skin so black?" Or they made sport of her, saying that she looked like African, or that she didn't need to put on sunscreen because her face was already black. Thus, there was utterance of racial discrimination.

Furthermore, they neglected Nayoung because her family couldn't afford to go to a family restaurant or amusement center on weekends. As a consequence, she became intimidated, ashamed or behaved as if she had lost confidence.

On the other hand, there were out-of-classroom restrictions such as lack of interaction with the principal, colleagues, parents and local organizations. Her colleagues weren't well aware of the importance of multicultural education as there weren't many preschoolers from multicultural families in their classes. They believed that it would be more important to adjust oneself to mainstream culture, and that there would be no need to worry about if preschoolers of multicultural families adapted themselves well to that. Accordingly, there wasn't active interchange between her and her colleagues in relation to this matter, and that was also the case for her relationships with the other ecological environmental factors such as the principal, parents and local institutions.

4. CONCLUSIONS

As there is a continuing change in early childhood classrooms under the influence of personal, relational and contextual characteristics, not only the major elements of the classrooms such as teachers, preschoolers and instruction but social interaction with principals, other teachers, families and local institutions are all important. An ideal community called 'educational community' is one in which people not only belong together but also become together (Jo & Suh, 2004). But the social interaction of the Sunshine classroom was quite insufficient, and that may not be the only case for this classroom. Early childhood teachers should have the right understanding of multicultural education, and accurate awareness and reflective thinking of their own teaching are both necessary as well so that they could provide quality multicultural education in their classrooms. Moreover, they should try to collaborate with everybody concerned in diverse ways to create a supportive system, and research institutions should provide them with information on how to practice multicultural education in various contexts of the educational community.

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